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ABSTRACT

Gaining insight into rural school superintendents' concerns about serving special needs students in inclusive classrooms could help minimize problems in implementing this change. A survey using the Change Facilitator's Stages of Concerns Questionnaire was mailed to superintendents in all 708 rural school districts in Texas; 484 responses were received. Combining all three stages of implementation, 92.7 percent of the districts reported they were actively engaged with inclusion. Findings suggest that rural school superintendents wanted to know more about the "how-tos" of implementation, were not concerned about working with others to facilitate implementation, and were thinking about possible alternatives to inclusion. Superintendents' concerns were not affected by school district size or the proportion of special needs children in the total student population, but were affected by the stage of implementation in their district. (CDS)

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"LEADERSHIP IN RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS: WHERE IS THE SUPERINTENDENT?"

by

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Dr. Hooper is currently serving as a principal in the Turner Unified School District in Kansas City, Kansas, at one of the largest elementary schools in the state. His school serves nearly 700 students in grades PK through 5.

He has previously served as a high school teacher, elementary school principal, junior high school principal, high school principal, and a superintendent of schools in Texas for five years. Dr. Hooper has over seventeen year of successful educational experience. He is noted for his research in school violence, school restructuring, and educational leadership. In addition he is an adjunct professor, consultant, and he and his wife own and operate their own private business.

DESCRIPTION OF SESSION

Ordinarily one would assume that rural school superintendents provide leadership to all the district's programs. Results from a study investigating the implementation of inclusion in Texas rural schools raises some question regarding this assumption. This session provides an overview of the study, findings, conclusions, and recommended actions for facilitating the superintendents leadership role in implementing inclusive practices.

INCLUSION IN RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS; WHERE IS THE SUPERINTENDENT?

Today's superintendents are faced with the ever increasing implications of responding to federal laws and civil rights court cases that have been initiated by state and federal governments (Hill, 1993). Superintendents realize that with the change of placing students with special needs in the regular classrooms will come resistance; the concerns of teachers, administrators and parents will have to be considered. According to Kelly (1974), "leadership is the performance of acts which assist the group in achieving certain ends" (p. 365). As the key leader in the school district in regard to the school's programs the superintendent's concerns can facilitate the nature of or discourage the school's personnel in achieving certain desired changes. In other words, the school superintendent's concerns influence the way those in the organization think, feel and behave toward change. Their concerns toward the impending changes involved in the inclusion of special needs children will probably influence the level of acceptance of others in his/her district.

As districts move toward serving special needs children in inclusive arrangements, knowing what concerns superintendents have allows the development of strategies for addressing them. Internal and external agents (ex., state department representatives, university preparation programs, consultants, intermediate units, special education cooperative representatives, etc.) can better serve district leaders if they know the kinds of concerns these leaders have. Gaining insight into rural school superintendents' concerns toward serving children with special needs in inclusive classrooms could help minimize problems in implementing this innovation at all levels of

the organization. Given the less than stellar history of successful implementation of planned changes in education, information regarding implementation processes is crucial if the future is to boast of a greater number of successes.

Knowing an individual's stage of concern regarding an innovation is important information. It can guide facilitators of change in selecting the type of information, development activities, or support to provide the individual that will move him/her through the stages and ultimately to the routine use of the innovation. The results of this study offer some interesting perspectives regarding the implementation of an innovation in rural schools and the role which the superintendent plays in the implementation process.

The overall objectives of this paper are: (1) to provide information regarding the results of a study identifying the concerns of rural school superintendents in Texas toward serving children with special needs in inclusive classroom arrangements, and (2) to discuss the implications of these findings for change facilitators at all levels of the educational community. An overview of the study including population, guiding questions and the methodology are presented. Major findings, conclusions and recommendations for practice make up the major portion of the presentation.

An Overview of the Study

The study focused on rural school districts and the concerns (as measured by the Change Facilitator's Stages of Concerns Questionnaire) of their chief executive officers regarding the innovation of inclusion as a method of serving students with special needs. The major purpose of the study was to identify the concerns of rural school

superintendents toward inclusion. The population for the study was the 708 superintendents of rural school districts in Texas, i.e., those districts with average daily attendance of 1,600 or fewer students. A survey packet was mailed to each superintendent. It contained a cover letter, a survey instrument (i.e., the CFSoCQ), a demographic data sheet, and a self-addressed, stamped return envelope.

The instrument used was the Change Facilitator Stages of Concerns Questionnaire (CFSoCQ) (Hall, et al, 1991). Permission to use the CFSoCQ was secured from the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, Austin, Texas. The CFSoCQ is based on the seven stages of concern identified through the work of Hord, Rutherford, Huling-Austin, and Hall (1987). Hord, et al state that research has identified seven stages of concern that users, or potential users, of an innovation may have. These include: (a) Stage 0-Awareness Concerns, (b) Stage 1-Informational Concerns, (c) Stage 2-Personal Concerns, (d) Stage 3-Management Concerns, (e) Stage 4-Consequence Concerns, (f) Stage 5-Collaboration Concerns, and (g) Stage 6-Refocusing Concerns.

The CFSoCQ requires respondents to indicate what they think about a specific innovation by marking each of 35 items on a 0 to 7 Likert scale according to how accurately the items describe the respondent's current feeling about the innovation. The 35 items represent seven stages of concern, five items for each stage. Raw scores for each stage of concern are converted to percentile scores and arrayed on a stages of concern profile. A demographic data sheet asking respondents to indicate: district enrollment (under 500, 501-999, 1,000-1,600, and over 1,600), percent of total enrollment who are special needs children (0-5%, 6-10%, 11-15%, 16-20%, and more than 20%), and the status of inclusion by implementation stage (not implemented, in

planning stages only, partially implemented, and fully implemented) was also developed.

An exceptionally good return of 484 questionnaires (68%) was received. Raw data generated by the usable CFSoCQ's and demographic data sheets were scored, entered on a disk according to the protocol and mailed to the research analyst at the University of Texas - Austin. Total group and subgroups based on demographic categories were profiled by a computer program which displays raw scores, corresponding percentile scores, and graphs the respondent data according to each of the seven stages of concern. The data were analyzed to determine the overall concerns of rural school superintendents toward inclusion and what differences in superintendents' concerns by enrollment categories, in terms of special needs children as a percent of the total district enrollment, and in terms of the status of program implementation.

Findings, Conclusions, and Recommendations for Practice.

Of the 482 respondents who completed the demographic section of the survey, nearly half (236, 49.0%) were from school districts with an enrollment under 500 students. Just under 30% (28.4%) were from districts with and enrollment of 501-999; 93 (19.3%) were from districts with an enrollment of 1,000-1,600; and slightly over 3% (16) were districts identified (by Texas Education Agency) previously as rural schools, i.e., 1,600 or less ADA. There were 481 respondents who completed the data section concerning special needs children as a percent of district enrollment. Slightly less than 60% (59.0%) were from districts with 6-10% or 11-15% of special needs children as a percent of district enrollment. Just over 30% (31.6%) reported 16% or more special needs children as a percent of district enrollment. Finally, 481 respondents indicated the

status of program (inclusion) implementation. When combining all three stages of implementation, 92.7% of the districts reported they were actively engaged with inclusion. The majority of the superintendents reported their districts as having inclusion partially implemented (60.9%). Only 7.3% reported "not implemented" as the status of inclusion in their districts and 28% reported the status of inclusion in their district as "fully implemented".

A summary analysis of data indicated that the overall superintendents expressed their greatest concerns at CFSoCQ Stages 0 (Awareness), 1 (Informational), 3 (Management), and 6 (Refocusing); less concern at Stage 2 (Personal), and much less concern at Stages 4 (Consequence) and 5 (Collaboration):

- Rural school superintendents as a total group (N=484) generated the following CFSoCQ Profile of Concerns regarding inclusion: Their most intense concerns were at Stage 0, moderately intense concerns at Stages 1, 3, and 6, less intense concerns at Stage 2 and few concerns at Stages 4 and 5. It is probable that the rural school superintendents gave little attention to inclusion but wanted to know more about the "how to do its" of implementation, were not concerned about working with others to facilitate its implementation, and were thinking about possible alternatives for it.

Importantly, the superintendents' concerns relative to their districts' status regarding the implementation of inclusion indicated some significant differences:

- Rural superintendents whose districts were at different stages of implementing inclusion (not implemented, planning for it or fully implemented) vary somewhat

from the total group profile. Those in the planning category (N=18) wanted to know more about inclusion, the "how to do its" of implementation, and how to work with others effectively regarding its implementation. Those in the fully implemented category (N=135) were somewhat less interested in knowing more about inclusion, the "how to do its" of implementation, and were less concerned about alternatives to or replacements for it. Superintendents who reported their district to be not implemented (N=293) were similar to the total group (N=484).

Considering both demographic and CFSoCQ data resulted in several conclusions/hypotheses.

Among them were the following:

- School district size appeared to make no significant difference regarding the superintendents' concerns about inclusion.
- The proportion of special needs children in the total student population did not appear to make a significant difference regarding the superintendents' concerns about inclusion.
- The status of implementing inclusion appeared to generate significantly different kinds and intensities of concerns among superintendents
- Superintendents do not perceive themselves as facilitators regarding the implementation of inclusion.
- Superintendents see themselves playing a significant role when the district is planning for the implementation of inclusion.

- Rural school superintendents appear to be meeting their leadership responsibilities regarding the implementation of inclusion. They are significantly involved during the discussion and planning stage and less so when implementation occurs. They maintain their oversight responsibility regarding the management function and maintain their oversight responsibility regarding the management function and keep their options open by considering alternatives to or replacements for inclusion.
- Superintendents are uncertain whether inclusion is the preferred or most effective method for serving special needs children.

Data from this study point to several actions that might be taken by rural school superintendents and others associated with this group:

- Districts are a "rich" in-house resource as regards the implementation of inclusion. Several groups (Texas Education Agency, Texas Association for School Boards, Texas Association of School Administrators, and others) should help these districts disseminate their knowledge regarding the successful implementation of this change.
- Rural school superintendents should seriously consider using the materials available from the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, Austin, Texas to determine the profile of concerns shared by administrators and teachers regarding the implementation of inclusion or any other substantive change in their district.

and,

- Superintendents should consider developing a district profile of successful implementation processes in building support for and confidence in future implementation efforts. This profile could be one feature of the district's internal and community public relations program throughout the change process.
- Rural school superintendents can assist in the implementation of inclusion by seeking answers to the following questions. Who is facilitating inclusion in the school district? What concerns do they have? What can (and should) be done to address those concerns?

Some Additional Considerations

- Implementation of innovations moves through several phases, i.e. planning, initiation, on-site implementation, and institutionalization. The superintendent's role as facilitator may change as the phases change. If so, more needs to be known about that role change.
- Although this study did not focus on the effectiveness of inclusion as a method for serving special needs children, there are some indications that superintendents have concerns in this area. Therefore, an effort should be initiated to determine whether or not inclusion is achieving its objectives and doing it more effectively than methods utilized prior to its implementation.
- All of the rural school superintendents (484) indicated they were thinking about alternatives to or replacements for inclusion. It might be helpful to know what they had in mind. Improved programs for serving special needs children could result.

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